



8-16-1881

At St. Michael's. An Arctic Summer Scene-
Description of the Trading Post Yukon River Indian
Trappers-Outfitting the Corwin. St. Michael's,
Alaska, June 20, 1881.

John Muir

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb>

Recommended Citation

Muir, John, "At St. Michael's. An Arctic Summer Scene-Description of the Trading Post Yukon River Indian Trappers-Outfitting the Corwin. St. Michael's, Alaska, June 20, 1881." (1881). *John Muir: A Reading Bibliography by Kimes*. 162.
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb/162>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the John Muir Papers at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in John Muir: A Reading Bibliography by Kimes by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.

SIGHTS IN THE ARCTIC.

St. Michael's--Native Traders of the Far North.

Tracings of the Ancient Ice Flood-- Siberian Villages.

An Arctic Hunter's Home--Esquimo Cemeteries.

Fauna and Flora of the Frozen Zone.

[FROM THE BULLETIN'S SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.]

The following correspondence supplementary to what was published in the *Bulletin* yesterday was also received by the Alaska Commercial Company's steamer St. Paul, from the *Bulletin's* special correspondent of the Far North:

AT ST. MICHAEL'S.

An Arctic Summer Scene--Description of the Trading Post--Yukon River Indian Trappers--Outfitting the Corwin.

St. MICHAEL'S, Alaska,
June 24, 1881.

Sunshine now in the far north, sunshine all the long nightless days; ripe and mellow and hazy, like that which feeds the fruits and vines. We came into it two days ago when we were approaching this old-fashioned Russian trading post near the mouth of the Yukon River. How sweet and kindly and reviving it is after so long a burial beneath dark, sleety storm clouds. For a whole month, from the beginning of this bright time, it snowed every day more or less, perhaps only for an hour or two, or all the twenty-four hours, not one day on which snow did not fall either in wet, sleety blasts, making sludge on the deck and rigging and afterward freezing fast, or in dry crystals, blowing away as fast as it fell. I have never before seen so cloudy a month, weather so strangely bewildering and depressing. It was all one stormy day, broken here and there by dim gleams of sunlight, but never so dark at midnight that we could not read ordinary print. The general effect of this confusing interblending of the hours of day and night, the quick succession of howling gales that we encountered and dull black clouds dragging their ragged, drooping edges over the waves, was very depressing, and when, at length, we found ourselves free beneath a broad, high sky full of exhilarating light, we seemed to have emerged from some gloomy, icy cave. How garish and blinding the light seemed to us then, and how bright the lily spangles that flashed on the glassy water, and with what rapture we gazed into the crimson and gold of the midnight sunsets.

A VISITOR FROM SHORE.

While we were yet fifty miles from land a small gray finch came aboard and flew about the rigging while we watched its movements and listened to its suggestive notes as if we had never seen a finch since the days of our merry truant rambles along the hedge rows. A few hours later a burly, dozing bumblebee came droning around the pilot house, seeming to bring with him all the warm, summery gardens we had ever seen.

AN ARCTIC SUMMER SCENE.

The 4th of June was the most beautiful of the days we spent in the Arctic Ocean. The water was smooth, reflecting a tranquil, pearl-gray sky with spots of pure azure near the zenith and a belt of white around the horizon that shone with a bright, satiny lustre, trying to the eyes like clear sunshine. Some seven whale ships were in sight, becalmed with their canvas spread. Tchutchi hunters in pursuit of seals were gliding about in light skin-covered canoes, and gulls, auks, elder ducks and other water birds in countless multitudes skimmed the glassy level, while in the background of this Arctic picture the Siberian coast, white as snow could make it, was seen sweeping back in fine, fluent, undulating lines to a chain of mountains, the tops of which were veiled in the shining sky.

A few snow crystals were shaken down from a black cloud towards midnight, but most of the day was one of deep peace, in which God's love was manifest as in a countenance.

ARCTIC TEMPERATURE.

The average temperature for most of the month commencing May 20th has been but little above the freezing point, the maximum about 45°. To-day the temperature in the shade at noon is 65°, the highest since leaving San Francisco. The temperature of the water in Behring Sea and Strait, and as far as we have gone in the Arctic, has been about from 29° to 35°. But as soon as we approached within fifty miles of the mouths of the Yukon, the temperature changed suddenly to 42°. The mirage effects we have witnessed on the cruise thus far are as striking as any I ever saw on the hot American desert. Islands and headlands seemed to float in the air, distorted into the most unreal, fantastic forms imaginable, while the individual mountains of a chain along the coast appear to dance at times up and down with a rhythmic motion, in the tremulous refracting atmosphere. On the north-east side of Norton Sound I saw two peaks, each with a flat, black table on top, looming suddenly up and sinking again alternately, like boys playing see-saw on a plank.

THE POST OF ST. MICHAEL'S.

P — The trading post of St. Michael's was established by the Russians in 1833. It is built of drift timber derived from the Yukon, and situated on a low bluff of lava on the island of St. Michael's, about sixty-five miles northeast of the north-most of the Yukon mouths. The fort is composed of a square of log buildings and palisades, with outlying bastions pierced for small cannon and musketry, while outside the fort there is a few small buildings and a Greek church, reinforced during the early part of the summer with groups of tents belonging to the Indians and traders. The fort is now occupied by the employees of the Alaska Commercial Company. This is the headquarters of the fur traders of Northern and Central Alaska.

P — The Western Fur and Trading Company have a main station on the side of the bay about three miles from here, and the two companies being in close competition have brought on a condition of the fur business bitterly bewailed by the sub-traders located along the Yukon and its numerous tributaries. Not only have the splendid profits of the good old times diminished nearly to zero, say they, but the big prices paid for skins have spoiled the Indians, making them insolent and lazy and dangerous, without conferring any substantial benefit upon them. Since they can now procure all the traders' supplies they need for fewer skins than formerly, they hunt less, and spend their idle hours in gambling and quarreling.

P — The furs and skins of every kind derived annually from the Yukon and Kuskokwim regions, and shipped from here, are said to be worth from \$80,000 to \$100,000. The trade goods are brought to this point from San Francisco by the rival companies in June, and delivered to their agents, by whom they are distributed to their traders and taken up the rivers to the different stations in the interior in boats towed most of the way by small stern-wheel steamers. Then during the winter the furs are collected and brought to this point and carried to San Francisco by the vessels that bring the goods for the next season's trade.

YUKON RIVER INDIANS.

P — On the 19th instant the steamer belonging to the Western Fur and Trading Company arrived from a station 1,500 miles up the river, towing three large boats laden with Indians and traders with the last year's collection of furs. After they began to set their tents and unload the furs, we went over to the storerooms of the Company to look at the busy throng. They formed a strange, wild picture on the rocky beach: the squaws setting the tents and cutting armfuls of dry grass to lay on the ground as a lining for fur carpets; the children with wild, staring eyes gazing at us, or, heedless of all the stir, playing with the dogs; groups of dandy warriors, arranged in all the colors of the rainbow, grim, and cruel, and coldly dignified; and a busy train coming and going between the warehouse and the boats, storing the big bundles of shaggy bear-skins, black and brown, martin, mink, fox, beaver, otter, lynx, moose, wolf and wolverine, many of them with claws spread and hair on end, as if still fighting for life, vividly suggestive of the far wilderness whence they came — its mountains and valleys, and broad grassy plains and far-reaching rivers, and forests and bogs. The Indians seemed to me the wildest animals of all the traders, not at all wild, save in dress, but rather gentle and subdued in manners and aspect, like half-paid village ministers. They held us in a long interesting conversation, and gave us many valuable facts concerning the heart of the Yukon country.

OUTFITTING THE CORWIN.

P — We are making a short stay here to take on provisions, and intend to go northward again tomorrow to meet the search party that we landed near Koinchin Island.

JOHN MUIR.

are

n/ e/

/

together

They were

its
its
were